



CAPTivations

Success Stories in Prevention

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CASA Start (CO)

Young teens at Lake Middle School in Denver who are at risk for substance abuse and other high-risk behaviors now have youth advocates and other mentors on their side, thanks to Mi Casa and the CASA START program.

The kids in this program come in with several strikes against them, observes Brigid McRaith, project manager for CASA START. The program serves a middle school which is 93 percent Latino, has 95 percent of its students on free or reduced price lunches, and has an annual turnover rate of 120 percent.

"One-third of these kids have at least one parent who has been in jail," McRaith said. "A half to two-thirds of them have substance abuse going on in their homes. Getting these kids to school every day is an

accomplishment; they're having to take care of their younger siblings and chores around the house."

CASA START (Striving Together to Achieve Rewarding Tomorrows) is a program of the National Center on Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York. Mi Casa was chosen in 1999 to be one of the CASA START sites because of its history of working with Latina women and youth in the community.

Mi Casa was started by a group of Latina Head Start mothers in 1976 to help themselves and others further their education and start businesses. It began a youth program about 12 years ago, primarily for teenage Latina girls, but open for all youth.

Mi Casa was the first Denver site for CASA START. It operates out of Lake Middle School and also serves its primary feeder elementary school, Cheltenham Elementary School.

At the center of the program are the youth advocates, who provide case management and mentoring for the youth. Their caseload is one to 15, allowing for 45 kids in the program at the middle school level and 30 at the elementary school level. The youth advocates meet regularly with their kids; tutoring them three times a week; meeting their teachers to discuss

behavior; talking with the youth about anger management, organization, and other life skills. "As the kids would put it, we're gonna be in your business," states McRaith.

The educational services component also involves the youth advocates. They meet with the teachers to make sure their assigned youth are attending school and explain to the teacher any problems the youth might be having which hinders their educational process, such as a death in the family, or an impending divorce.

One student, for example, was deaf in one ear and was sitting in the back of the class. Appearing not pay attention and the teacher was

angry. The youth advocate explained the problem, and the teacher moved the student up to the front of the room. Now she is one of the best students in the class.

The youth advocates not only work with the kids in the program, they also work with their families. The

youth advocates go into the homes to talk about discipline, how to talk to their teens, and how to communicate to them about substance abuse and sex.

"A lot of these parents think their kids are grown up," McRaith explained. "We work with them to get them to think otherwise."

CASA START's program includes parent groups, in which the families meet for dinner, and then the parents meet separately to vent about what is going on with their kids and to learn such things as how to give their kids self esteem and how to give them some space, while still being an important force in their lives.

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At first, McRaith said, the parents tend to be resistant to the program, thinking the youth advocates are just more social workers in their lives, telling them how to raise their kids. But after awhile, the parents and the kids both learn to trust the advocates, seeing them as a valuable resource.

Besides the youth advocates, volunteer mentors are available from the local agency, Save Our Youth, to meet with the kids in the program once a week. These mentors stay with their assigned youth until college, meeting with them to hang out, go to movies or other activities with them, and just spend time with them.

"It's like having a full-time one of us all the time," McRaith said.

In addition, other volunteers help out with the after school and summer programs. They usually stay just for a year at a time, but as McRaith noted, any adults who are positive role models for the kids are wanted and appreciated.

The after school program involves everything from tutoring to self-esteem building for the young women in the group. Cultural-based art therapy is offered, to help the kids process what they believe about their culture and about themselves.

CASA START also includes monthly theme-based presentations from the community in its after school program. It has held HIV workshops and has hosted ex-gang members to talk about the dangers of joining gangs. If nothing else is planned, games and other such activities are offered.

One area in which the program is working with the kids is in financial competency, teaching them how to manage money, open a bank account, and so forth.



Some of these kids, McRaith said, come from homes where money is poorly managed. They might have no food, but have four televisions, all hooked up to cable.

In the summer, CASA START offers its youth a variety of activities, ranging from swimming to horseback riding to YMCA camps.

"We see a complete transformation in these kids when they go to camp," McRaith said. "They really let their guard down when they are allowed to be a kid for a week."

Another component of CASA START is community policing. Lake Middle School has a police officer on-site daily, and he is available for students to talk to him about any issues that come up, while he can talk to them about safety and other issues. He is also available for students and parents to make anonymous reports. If a house students have to walk by is not seen as safe—it may be a haven for drugs, for example, or someone is hassling a student on the way to or from school—students or parents can report it to the school's police officer, and he or she can make sure the report is investigated.

Underpinning all these aspects of the program are incentives. Students in the program set various goals and are rewarded for them. For example, kids who make all grades above a C on their report cards might get a skateboard or other item that they want.

The kids also get incentives for showing up to various activities. Usually, they get raffle tickets if they come to their tutoring sessions or after school programs, or if they raise their grades in certain classes where they are struggling. On a regular basis, CASA START holds drawings for gift certificates from stores where the kids like to shop.

Currently, Mi CASA is measuring the success of CASA START through the number of suspensions, the participants' grade point averages, and attendance rates, though they are also working with the University of Colorado-Denver to evaluate the long-term results through high school. Attendance is more of a mixed bag, especially in the second semester, when attendance tends to be down, anyway. Some participants' attendance has improved greatly, some have remained the same, and some have gotten worse. On average, the participants' grades have risen half a point, with 10 percent having gone up two points, and a few who have gotten worse. The most promising statistic has been in suspensions, which has dropped by 80 percent.

...to help kids process what
**they believe about
their culture and
about themselves.**

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Resources:

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Prevention
www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html

Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogether.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of
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